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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 000725

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SUBJECT: FIRST NATIONAL FORUM ON HUMAN RIGHTS BOYCOTTED BY OPPOSITION

Classified By: Pol/Econ Erinn C. Reed for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: The Government of Djibouti's Ad-Hoc Committee on Human Rights held the first ever national forum on Human Rights 17-18 May, 2004. This forum was funded by a DHRF grant from Embassy Djibouti and by United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The main goal of this forum was to open debate on Human Rights among the population of Djibouti. Results were to be incorporated into new laws on Human Rights and guides for parliamentarians on creating laws with human rights in mind. However, the forum was boycotted by opposition leaders, including the President of the Djiboutian League of Human Rights. The Minister of Justice commented in his opening remarks that the opposition was invited but didn't deem it useful to make their opinions public. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Under extreme security and by invitation only, the Government of Djibouti held its first ever National Forum on the Status of Human Rights 17-18 May, 2004 at the hall of the Union National des Femmes Djiboutienne (UNFD - National Union of Djiboutian Women). Participants were required to show their invitation, pass through metal detectors and leave all mobile phones at the door before entering. Those that did not have an invitation or came late were turned away. Reportedly, a few reporters from Radio Television Djibouti (RTD) were turned away by the Republican Guard, even though they had invitations. While participants waited for the opening ceremony to begin, a popular musician played songs of social commentary. The forum began upon the arrival of President Guelleh, who presided over the opening ceremonies along with the Minister of Justice, the President of the Supreme Court, and the Prime Minister.

¶3. (C) The site of the forum was a point of contention with opposition groups, who said they preferred "a neutral site." The initial location was to be the Palais du Peuple, a civic center built by China, but the air conditioning has been broken for several months so the site was nixed. The alternate site acceptable to the opposition was the Sheraton Hotel. According to a press release from the Djiboutian League for Human Rights (LDDH) carried in the May 19th edition of Realite, an opposition party journal, this option was ruled out for financial reasons, despite requests for extra funds from the UNDP, one of the donor organizations funding the forum. This, however, was not the main reason for the boycott by the opposition. In a "Lettre Ouverte" published in the 17 March 2004 edition of Realite, the four main opposition groups declared they would not attend the upcoming forum on Human Rights. They said the Government of Djibouti had not made steps to fulfill its promises of decentralization written in the 2001 peace accords and had committed several violations of human rights. President of the LDDH, Jean Paul Noel, told Pol/Econ the opposition felt that it was not worth its participation when nothing had been done on any of the Government's earlier promises.

¶4. (U) In his opening statement at the Forum, Minister of Justice Ismail Ibrahim Houmed claimed that the opposition had been informed of the dates of the Forum and had agreed, but three weeks later published an open letter saying they would not attend and were not in agreement. Houmed went on to say that two days before the forum, he sent invitations once again to the leaders of the opposition, but they did not deem it useful to express their contradictions in public. Houmed commented in his opening remarks that this conference is held with an international context in mind, contrasting notably with situations in Palestinian territories, Iraq and Ivory Coast. Houmed also remarked that the "great powers" of the world had taken no action in Palestine and Iraq. He went on to say that "after the toppling of the dictator in Iraq and the promise of a free and democratic country, human rights are being abused. The Iraqi people have lost their basic rights as human beings. In a world on fire, Djibouti is an island of peace." Houmed highlighted that "of the 350 prisoners in the one jail in Djibouti, none are political prisoners and there is no death

penalty."

15. (U) Media reaction to the Human Rights forum was strong and broad. The 19 May edition of Realite carried a press release from the LDDH stating that the forum should have been postponed until the next judicial session, in order to give the Ministry of Justice the necessary time to fulfill necessary conditions for the best success and transparency of the forum. Among these conditions were holding the forum at a neutral site and ensuring participation of international Human Rights organizations to act as observers and the participation of all politicians. The statement also demanded tangible and palpable elements in favor of total independence of the judiciary and a solemn declaration of the end of impunity, and abuses of power by the installation of completely independent judicial structures.

16. (U) Also in Realite, a press release from the Association for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms (ADDHL) deplored the absence of the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH), based in Paris, the Inter-African Union for Human Rights (UIDH), based in Ouagadougou, as well as the Djiboutian labor unions. It further said that without the participation of the opposition parties, the forum had become an item of non-interest. The ADDHL added that the status of Human Rights could not be objectively described without discussion and debate.

17. (U) Le Renouveau Djiboutien, the opposition journal of Daher Ahmed Farah -- arrested several times in 2003 for his publications -- called President Guelleh "the Champion of Violations of Human Rights." The article also called the event only a "family affair" citing the absence of opposition parties and of defenders of Human Rights.

18. (U) La Liberte, opposition journal of the Front pour la Restauration de l'Unite et de la Democratie (FRUD), said the opposition "could not support this parody of democracy." It went on to say that by participating, the opposition's presence would have supported a regime that denies all free speech and civil liberties. Liberte also called the invitations "selective," indicating that the true spectrum of the Djiboutian population had not been represented.

19. (C) COMMENT: Post believes that the objectives of this forum were a step in the right direction on the issue of Human Rights in Djibouti. However, with the boycott of opposition political parties, the forum may not bring the effective change that is desired by many in the population. The reasons for the stagnation of change and implementation of the peace accords may lie with the Government, but the silence of the opposition on this matter does not help and does not reflect a true understanding of the importance of participation in democratic processes, regardless of their sentiments about the existing government. END COMMENT.
RAGSDALE